

**Department of Veterans Affairs
Special Emphasis Program Observances
Event Planning Tool & Tips**

Background

Observance events are an important part of the Special Emphasis Program (SEP). SEP Managers (SEPMs or equivalents) should encourage their facility or organization to appreciate diversity and cultivate inclusion through activities geared towards raising awareness, highlighting achievements, increasing knowledge, and addressing any identified barriers to the full participation of all Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees.

SEP observance activities are sanctioned under the following authorities:

- [Executive Order 11478 - Equal employment opportunity in the Federal Government](#)
- [Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972](#)
- [Civil Service Reform Act of 1978](#)
- [29 Code of Federal Regulation, Part 1614.102\(b\)\(4\)](#)

The Comptroller General, in two landmark decisions (B-200017 [PDF], March 10, 1981, and B199387, March 23, 1982), allows expenditures at agency-sponsored cultural awareness events, appropriate funds for guest speakers, artistic and/or cultural activities, food exhibits or samples (not intended for meals or refreshments), or publications, when the intent is to promote cross-cultural harmony and awareness. Where applicable, the International Merchant Purchase Authorization Card (IMPAC) or IMPAC convenience checks may be used for the limited scope of purchasing food items for sampling or exhibits at the agency-sponsored cultural awareness events.

Equal employment opportunity (EEO) managers should take the appropriate steps to ensure compliance with 29 Code of Federal Regulation, Part 1614.102(b)(4). SEPMs and SEP committee members should not be expected to finance EEO program activities with personal funds or bake sales, etc.

The following information is provided as a general guide to planning SEP observance events or ceremonies. Smaller or less formal events will require fewer steps. These steps should be modified to meet your event type.

Phase One: Pre-Planning

SEPMs should:

- 1) Submit an annual budget if funds are available.

To facilitate the planning and budgeting of equal employment opportunity (EEO) activities, SEPMs may submit a proposed annual budget for all activities. This proposed budget should include:

- Training
- SEP observance events
- Materials (plaques, posters, etc.)

The goals and objectives of the EEO Program, the organization's mission, and various affirmative employment and recruitment plans must be considered when developing activities. SEPMs must use discretion in selecting activities. All activities must fulfill an affirmative employment goal and be related to employment issues.

2) Organize a SEP observance event planning committee.

The SEP observance event planning committee should consist of a chairperson, committee members, and other support staff. SEPMs and committee members will need to obtain the EEO program manager's approval for all activities and should consider:

- EEO program objectives
- The organization's mission
- Affirmative employment plans
- Recruitment plans
- EEO program guidelines
- EEO office protocol
- Performance measures

3) Identify the SEP observance theme.

SEP observance themes are often established by the following:

- [Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute \(DEOMI\)](#)
- [Association for the Study of African American Life and History \(ASALH\)](#)
- [Federal Asian Pacific American Council \(FAPAC\)](#)
- [Veterans Health Administration Patient Care Services \(VHA PCS\)](#)
- [National Women's History Alliance \(NWHHA\)](#)
- [National Council of Hispanic Employment Program Managers \(NCHEPM\)](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy \(ODEP\)](#)
- [Society of American Indian Government Employees \(SAIGE\)](#)

4) Consider various event formats.

Consider what type of event will be most conducive to relay the theme and encourage maximum participation. Review [Suggested Activities for Special Emphasis Program Observances](#).

Phase Two: Proposal

- 1) SEPMs and SEP committee members should prepare and submit to their EEO program manager at least 60 days prior to the proposed event a formal SEP observance event proposal.

The proposal should include:

- Three SEP observance event options describing fully developed ideas outlining all planned activities and information on the keynote speaker or panel members or description of the cultural activity, etc.
- Leadership point(s) of contact who will approve the proposal and event date.
- Budget requests (all budget requests must be specific and detailed and should reflect the amount submitted in the annual budget). Appropriate invoices must be included. When funds are requested, they should be spent according to appropriate fiscal guidelines. The leadership point of contact who will approve the funds should be identified.
- Appropriate activity request forms.
- Draft of proposed announcement(s).
- Accessibility details including captions for videos or online events, interpreter, and accessibility of electronic documents. Note that documents should be Section 508 compliant. For assistance, [contact VA's Section 508 Office](#).

2) SEPMs and SEP committee members should be prepared to brief their management on the proposed event and funding needs.

To gain and maintain management support, EEO program managers, SEPMs, and committee members should:

- Ask managers to participate in the planning and implementation of activities.
- Request managers' recommendations.
- Involve management officials in the EEO program.
- Make appropriate recommendations to management officials.
- Keep management abreast of accomplishments.

Phase Three: Preparation

Once approval has been received from management, begin preparations.

- 1) Prepare a workplan, checklists and schedule. Review the [Event Checklist](#).
- 2) Coordinate with various stakeholders:
 - a. Employee affinity organizations or employee resource groups.
 - b. VA organizations involved with planning or producing goods and services for events such as media services for photography and/or videography and other services such as programs and posters.
 - c. Senior leadership or their executive assistants to ensure attendance.
- 3) Confirm authorization of approved funds.
- 4) Determine estimated total number of participants.
- 5) Reserve the event space or establish virtual platform. Research history of the event location/venue, if applicable and potentially significant.
- 6) Place necessary requests for recording/live streaming and/or audio/visual support.
- 7) Ensure the event is accessible and arrange for interpreting services, closed captioning, and/or communication access real-time translation (CART). An accessible event will include an interpreter, captions for videos or online events, and electronic documents should be Section 508 compliant. For assistance, [contact VA's Section 508 Office](#).

- 8) Prepare and distribute formal invitation letters or emails to the speakers, including leadership.
- 9) Once speakers are confirmed, re-confirm their names, titles, affiliations, mail and e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers.
- 10) Obtain speaker biographies.
- 11) Once leadership participation is confirmed, prepare talking points (upon request) and obtain appropriate concurrences before providing them.
- 12) Prepare briefing packages and other read-ahead material for leadership and/or management.
- 13) Prepare speaker introductions, talking points, and the program format for the Master/Mistress of Ceremonies.
- 14) Prepare event space layout including designated seating areas, podium, refreshments (if permitted), *press box (if open press), *flags display, etc. (*consult with the appropriate protocol officer).
- 15) Identify staging areas for program participants, guests, media, et al.
- 16) Prepare and distribute invitation letters or emails to internal and external guests of senior staff and partner organizations.
- 17) If permitted, arrange for refreshments and decorations.
- 18) Coordinate mementos of appreciation for speakers (i.e., a letter or certificate of appreciation from leadership).
- 19) Confirm participation with any partners/external organizations.
- 20) Obtain contact information for key players to include speaker(s), interpreter(s), et al and ensure they have your contact information.
- 21) Prepare an event binder or portfolio of resources and reference material for yourself as well as for leadership and/or management if needed.
- 22) A few days in advance of the event:
 - a. Conduct a run-through with participants if possible and test technology (for both virtual and in-person events).
 - b. Provide external guest list and media list to security personnel (for in-person events).

Phase Four: Marketing

- 1) Announce all events/program/initiatives at least one to two weeks prior to the event.
- 2) Remember to obtain approval for all publications, announcements, and displays prior to distribution. Utilize various forms of media for marketing and socializing the event. Such advertising may include:
 - Broadcast message (Hey VA!)
 - Facility newsletter
 - [VA's Diversity@Work newsletter](#)
 - Video monitors
 - Electronic bulletin boards
 - Poster displays
 - SharePoint
 - Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)

- 3) Announcements, publications, and displays should include consistent messaging.

Phase Five: Event Day

- 1) Orchestrate set up for event space. For virtual events, sign in early to test technology and ensure captioning is set up.
- 2) Brief program participants.
- 3) Provide final instructions to escorts/greeters, ushers, planning committee members, et al.
- 4) Review setup with caterer for refreshments (if applicable).
- 5) Provide water for program participants situated on the dais.
- 6) Coordinate with photographer and/or videographer on deliverables.
- 7) Review guest list and instructions with security guards.
- 8) Greet and escort guests and interpreter.
- 9) Greet and escort media; provide press kits (if open press).
- 10) Distribute printed program booklets.
- 11) Take photographs and issue certificates of appreciation to key program participants.
- 12) Direct guests to exit areas following the event.

Phase Six: Wrap-Up

- 1) Distribute photographs.
- 2) Send correspondence to include thank you notes or other types of mementos to key program participants and managers for their support.
- 3) Store resource documents for easy retrieval.
- 4) Prepare communications for newsletters, website, etc.
- 5) Conduct close-out with planning committee members, et al. to discuss any lessons learned, etc.
- 6) Prepare after action report.

Resources

- [VA Directive 5975, Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [VA Directive 5975.1, Processing Requests for Reasonable Accommodation from Employees and Applicants with Disabilities](#)
- [VA Handbook 5975.5, Special Emphasis Program Management](#)
- EEO Special Emphasis Program Training (TMS VA 1324578)